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ABSTRACT

A review of the past, the present, and the future offers an enlightening view of literacy in America. A 1967 issue of the "Illinois Journal of Education" has articles on phonics, linguistics, spelling, modalities of learning, disadvantaged children, vision screening and vision training, readiness, Montessori, partnerships between business and education and automation and technology. By contrast, the summer 1994 issue of the same journal concentrates on the integration of technology with literacy instruction. The fall issue focuses on whole language, developing writing within an integrated language arts program, developing life-long readers, and a staff development project to improve literacy in an urban school. Many of these topics are not educational issues at all: they are either social, political, economic or religious. Scholars would do well to focus on five issues that have a direct bearing on literacy education today: assessment, whole language, phonics, attacks on public schools and censorship among students. Personal reminiscences and opinions offer insights in these areas. Three important areas in the future are dyslexia, learning disabilities, and attention deficit disorder. The liberal application of these terms to today's school children has resulted in the perception that what is probably an academic or socioeconomic disadvantage is a physical disability. By using the jargon in vogue, scholars shift the source for academic problems away from the schools, away from homes, even away from free will of children, to some kind of mysterious flaw in the human brain. (TB)

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ED 379 617

# Assessing the Future

Allen Berger

A paper presented at the 27th Annual Illinois Reading Conference, Springfield, IL, March 18, 1995

In my talk this morning I'll share with you some activities that have been popular in past years in Illinois. Next, a few observations about activities that are popular now. I'll conclude with a few comments about what past and present activities mean for the future of literacy education in Illinois and throughout the United States.

## The Past

In 1964--(31 years ago)--the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction for the State of Illinois published a 104-page bulletin titled *Developmental Reading*. Following a Preface and Introduction there is a section on Debated Issues, which begins:

> Some of the issues which are being debated really are straw man issues. One that falls largely into this category is that of teaching phonics. Should we or shouldn't we teach phonics? The real questions are: "How should phonics be taught?" "When should phonics be taught?" "To what extent should phonics be taught?"

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Continuing:

> Another question involves a comparison of the basal reader program with the individualized reading program. . . .
>
> Still another topic that has invited discussion involves the teaching of reading in the junior and senior high school. Now we realize that our concept of reading should include more than word calling. We think of learning to read as a continuum and not something that can be complete at some stage of development. We know that there are common reading skills used in reading all different kinds of materials. We know also that special skills are needed for reading some materials. For example, reading in science is not quite the same as reading in social studies or mathematics. . . .
>
> Another question is the place of mechanical devices. . . . Those who emphasize the use of these instruments do not recognize the fundamental fact that reading is primarily a thinking process and therefore is likely to improve only when the thinking involved in the reading process improves. . . .
>
> The publication then proceeds to provide specific, useful information about reading readiness, word recognition, improving comprehension, motivation and materials, reading in the content fields, measurement and evaluation, and the all-school approach.

Whoever wrote the above had a keen grasp of trends in literacy education.

In December 1967, the whole issue of the *Illinois Journal of Education* that appeared with that date on the cover is devoted to Reading. Subtitled Read to Live--Live to Read, the issue has articles on phonics, linguistics, spelling, modalities of learning, disadvantaged children, vision screening and vision training, readiness, Montesorri, partnerships between business and education, automation and technology, and a few more.

One of these is titled "The Child in New Perspective" by Werner F. Cryns, M.D. of Chicago. He begins his article as follows:

> Hyperactive Harry
> Withdrawn William
> Dsylexic Diane
> Short-attention Shawn
> Under achiever Charlie
> Could-do-better Cory
> Problem-child Peter
> Learning-disability Larry
> Perceptual-problem Patty
> M-B-D Mary
> Bull-in-the-china-closet Bobby
> Far-out Fran
> Strabismus Sally
> Dsygraphic Dorothy
> Aphasic Phil

> These youngsters are familiar to most educators. They are currently attracting much attention. Perhaps only a few people realize they are relatives and have brothers and sisters known as Cerebral-Palsy Carol and Spastic-Diplegic Steven.
>
> Most children with learning disabilities are manisfestations of the same fundamental problem.

Doctor Cryns concludes that the way to solve some of these problems is by having the child crawling "combat" style on the floor five minutes a day three times daily, "traveling on hands and knees in precise cross-pattern--five minutes three times daily," patterning, eye-tracking exercises "twice daily, and a "hand to toe massage--twice daily."

Three years later the December 1970 issue of the *Illinois Journal of Education* devoted to reading contains more useful articles focusing on language experiences, children's literature, reading problems related to mathematics and science, early identification of reading disabilities, pre-reading and individualized reading programs, audiovisual materials, staffing and personnel for reading and the language arts, and planning a total reading program, among other articles focusing on reading and the right to read.

One of the fine articles in that issue--December 1970--of the *Illinois Journal of Education* is by Margaret Keyser Hill who, at that time, was Director, Reading Center, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. I had the pleasure of working with her a couple years earlier--from 1966-68. She was considered to be one of the best people in reading education in the nation. She had more NDEA--National Defense Education Act--institutes than just about any other person in the field of reading and English throughout the

United States. Many here are familiar with the *Durrell Analysis of Reading Difficulties*. Its author, Donald Durrell, who saw through completion more than 100 doctoral students at Boston University, said that his three best are Margaret Early who spent most of her career at Syracuse University, Jane Catterson who spent most of her career in universities throughout Canada, and Margaret Keyser Hill whose spent her career in Iowa and Pittsburgh and then at Carbondale, Illinois.

I mention all this because nothing comes out of nowhere. For instance, fifteen years ago Jerry Johns was the editor of the *Illinois Reading Council Journal*. Now he's on the Board of Directors of the International Reading Association.

The Present

William Faulkner once observed that the past is never dead; it's not even past. How true that is when one thinks of extraordinary writers and poets and leaders like Vachel Lindsay and Abraham Lincoln as well as educators like Margaret Keyser Hill and others in Illinois and across the nation. Who can tell where a person's influence stops?

The influence of a teacher hit home with me about seven years ago. I had just finished giving a talk at a conference when a woman came up to me from the audience. She reminded me that, years earlier, she was my student at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. She said that she used many of the ideas in her current position as the Founding Director of the Reading Center at Liberty University. So even though some twenty years had passed, and this student had moved some 2,000 miles, through her I had helped set up the Reading Center at Liberty University--the Rev. Jerry Falwell's university in Lynchburg, Virginia.

Recent issues of the *Illinois Reading Council Journal* focus on a different set of topics from the ones a couple decades ago. The theme of the Summer 1994 issue is Integrating Technology with Literacy Instruction with an editorial titled Teachers, Computers, and Resources for Literacy Instruction. The articles deal with chapter one, distance learning, hypermedia tools, reading recovery, and literacy-enriched dramatic play areas. The Fall 1994 issue focuses on whole language, developing writing within an integrated language arts program, developing life-long readers, and a staff development project to improve literacy instruction in an urban school. In both issues the writers of columns deal with inclusion, portfolios, diversity, families, the Holocaust, among other topics.

Some of these topics are issues and, in a very real sense, we can say there are no educational issues: they are either political, social, economic, religious--or some combination. Let's focus on five that have a direct bearing on literacy education today: assessment, whole language, phonics, attacks on public schools, and censorship among our students.

*Assessment*

The topic of assessment permeates the current *Introduction to the Illinois School Improvement Plan* and the November 22, 1994, issue of *Excellence in Action*, a quarterly publication of the Bloomington, Illinois, Public Schools. It also permeates the Illinois Public School Accreditation Process Resourse Document. This preoccupation with assessment is in line with a survey I made as the Chair of the IRA Studies and Research Implementation Committee two years ago. I had sent a questionnaire to reading educators in every state in the USA, every province in Canada, and to about 30 other countries altogether. The first question I asked was what is the

major literacy problem you have to confront, and the overwhelming response was assessment--from replies not just in the U.S. and Canada but throughout the world.

*Whole Language*

In my world-wide questionnaire, incidentally, the second major concern that was expressed dealt with whole language, which was a total surprise to me. Thinking about it, the concern may reflect a definitional problem--(what is whole language?). It may also reflect the difficulty of shifting from one approach (or philosophy) to another. And it may reflect a lack of understanding: I was surprised when I was told that some people equate whole language instruction with whole class instruction.

Furthermore, it may reflect a realization on the part of teachers that whole language instruction may not work for all children. In an unpublished paper titled Why Are California Reading Scores Low? by Ed Fry, author of the Fry Readability Formula, Fry points out that "California 4th grade students scored 49th out of a 50 state comparison. The only state they beat was Mississippi." He goes on to note that "while California ranked number 49, next to the bottom in reading achievement, it ranked . . . number 1 on percent of teachers placing heavy emphasis on whole language.

"Conversely speaking, California ranked number 1 on 'little or no emphasis' placed on phonics instruction." Fry's paper is based on a 310-page report prepared under the auspices of the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 1992.

Things don't have to be either/or: either whole languge/or phonics. There can be a happy balance and blend. What is important is that reading

skills not be overlooked: some children will pick them up by osmosis but most will need to have them taught explicitly.

*Phonics*

> The question of instruction in phonics has aroused a lot of controversy. Some educators have held to the proposition that phonetic training is not only futile and wasteful but also harmful to the best interests of a reading program. Others believe that since the child must have some means of attacking strange words, instruction in phonics is imperative. There have been disputes also relative to the amount of phonics to be taught, the time when the teaching should take place, and the methods to be used. In fact, the writer knows of no problem around which more disutes have centered.

That passage was written in 1934 by Paul McKee, one of the pioneers in the field of language arts. It begins the discussion of the phonics debate in the newly published two-volume *Encyclopedia of English Studies and Language Arts*, a project of the National Council of Teachers of English available from Scholastic. The writer of the encyclopedia passage, Patricia Cunningham, reviews the debate over phonics from the early 1900s through Rudolph Flesch's 1955 publication, *Why Johnny Can't Read* (which, she doesn't mention, was revised and republished 25 years later as *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*), through Jeanne Chall's 1967 publication, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* and on to Marilyn Adams' 1990 book *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*. Cunningham doesn't come to any

definitive conclusion other than to quote the late John Downing who observed that the goal of all instruction is to improve cognitive clarity.

Attacks on Public Schools

Influenced by Fantasy Posing as Fact*

Allen Berger

Having been a newspaper reporter-photographer on morning and afternoon dailies I can appreciate how difficult it is to get the facts and present them clearly and accurately. That is why I tip my hat to reporters for the *Cincinnati Enquirer.*

But what I find dismaying is the carelessness and misinformation provided by some of the syndicated columnists that appear in the *Enquirer.* Here are three examples.

- Joan Beck writes that "every study comparing the academic levels of children in industrialized nations shows American youngsters last, or close to last."

That's simply not true.

Two years ago a literacy study of 32 countries conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement showed that U.S. 9-year-olds and 14-year-olds (the two age groups studied) scored near the top. In reading comprehension the nine-year-olds in the U.S. were *second* out of all the countries; first was Finland.

In a world mathematics competition last year in Hong Kong, six American public high school students astonished the judges by achieving a perfect score on a nine-hour examination.

In science, U.S. 9-year-olds finished third out of 15 countries in the Second International Assessment of Educational Progress.

And scores on the ACT college entrance exam increased for the second year in a row nationally.

Despite the fact that this information has appeared in newspapers around the country (and presumably in Chicago where she works), Ms. Beck goes on to write that "test results are still a national embarassment" and that "the rising tide of mediocrity has not ebbed."

Her solution? She proposes that students go to school "year-round." My question is that if she thinks schools are so bad, why does she want students to go even longer?

- In the same Sunday edition of the *Enquirer* last August, Walter E. Williams (a distinguished professor of economics at George Mason University in Virginia), attacks future teachers and the education profession generally. To bolster his argument he quotes an unnamed "knowledgeable academic" and the president of Harvard University who "retired in 1933"--over a half century ago!

Laura Bunker, a student working toward a Master of Arts in Teaching at Miami University, became so concerned that she wrote to Professor Williams. To his credit, he sent her a gracious letter in which he enclosed "two tables that tell a large part of the story." To our astonishment one table dealt with "Test Performance by Undergraduate Major" for 1977-82--some 15 years ago! The other table with the same title was also old. Both tables were published in 1985--ten years ago!

- Last December Professor Williams began a column with the following sentence: "According to the National Right to Read Foundation, last year, the National Adult Literacy Survey reported that among adults with

12 years of schooling, over 96 percent couldn't read, write and compute well enough to attend college."

He continues: "In 1990, 40 million young Americans with nine to 12 years of schooling could not make sense out of a printed page. Only 56 percent of blacks over the age of 14 could read."

These are incredible statistics. Where did they come from? The National Right to Read Foundation. This is the same "foundation" that praises Hooked on Phonics, which last month agreed to quit making unsubstantiated and misleading claims about learning to read after an investigation by the Federal Trade Commission.

In December the TV news-magazine Dateline reported that, according to the foundation's tax return last year, most of its income was from Hooked on Phonics. Dateline also reported that the national foundation's "Suite 174" was nothing more than a box for mail collection.

I wrote to Mr. Williams to see what he knows about the foundation. He sent me their address and phone number in Virginia. A spokeswoman said that the foundation didn't actually do the study that Mr. Williams quoted but obtained the statistics from a government source.

Four months ago I wrote to Ms. Beck (and sent her copies of the international comparisons showing the performance of U.S. students). She hasn't replied.

How are politicians like Mike Fox and other leaders and the public supposed to make sense and sound educational laws for our children and citizens of Ohio when they are influenced by misinformation and fantasy posing as facts from syndicated columnists appearing in the pages of the *Enquirer* and elsewhere?

Censorship

## Censorship Among Our Students**

Allen Berger

Let me share a word or two about a censorship experience I had in a reading education course. It happened a couple years ago. The course, which met one evening a week, had 29 students: 23 undergraduates and the rest graduates; two of the students were practicing teachers.

I had told them about a more than million dollar censorship case that was at the time taking place in Willard, Ohio. Almost in passing I had mentioned that I had a great deal of documentation as a result of a colleague, Margo Sacco, who serves on the Commission on Intellectual Freedom, a part of the National Council of Teachers of English. The case dealt with *Impressions*, a literature-based reading series published by one of the leading publishers in the United States.

The lawsuit had been filed by parents represented by the American Family Association headed by the Rev. Donald Wildmon. His efforts were supported by other groups such as the Eagle Forum, Concerned Women for America, Citizens for Excellence in Education, Focus on the Family, Traditional Values Coalition, and the Christian Educators Association International. They charged that the series for grades one through six promotes witchcraft and satanism, encourages homosexuality, invades privacy, teaches an excessive regard for animals, among other matters.

An undergraduate student said that he'd like to read about the case, so after class I gave him my collection of papers.

Several weeks had passed, and I asked the student if he would care to share the highlights of the censorship case.

The following week the student began his presentation with a great deal of flair, repeatedly mispronouncing the name of the city as Williard. (There is a Hilliard in Ohio.) Some students were puzzled. I clarified the name and location.

He continued and startled some of the students by declaring that he sees nothing wrong with censorship.

He spoke of the "big bucks" being spent by the publishing companies "whose only interest is in getting their books into the schools."

Somewhat loose with the truth, he told the class that 15 or 20 other states are upset with the series. In reality, it wasn't states that were upset: it was *individuals* in *communities* who, in some instances with the help of outsiders, had brought lawsuits. (And one of the insiders in Willard, Ohio, was none other than the head of the community's school board who then became head of the Ohio State Fair; fired from that position by the governor, he then became a candidate for Governor of the State of Ohio.)

The student repeatedly referred to the censors as the Christians. When another student asked who are the people who are against censorship, his reply was that they are not Christians. (I didn't realize until later that among some fundamentalists only born-again Christians are considered Christians.)

The startling outcome--(a revelation to me)--was that about half of the class agreed with him!

Some stated that it's the taxpayers' schools, so the parents and taxpayers have the right to say what should be read. A couple of students said that if a book is not appropriate for one child it is not appropriate for other children. Several students praised homeschooling. When the discussion ended, the class was polarized by the student who, I later learned, is an evangelist.

While most education articles report classroom successes, this one reports a failure. But I share this episode because I'm not sure if we're aware of the extent of the belief--(at least I wasn't)--in favor of censorship among our current and future teachers. And I'm referring not just to English teachers: I've had science education majors who, in giving an oral report, suddenly interrupt their own presentation to tell the rest of the class about a need for creationism in the curriculum. Other colleagues in science and social studies have told me similar stories--students who have declared their belief in creationism, who have no intention of teaching children about evolution or dinosaurs, and who intend to teach about the glory of Jesus Christ.

It's true that the student might have alerted me ahead of time to his intentions even though I hadn't asked him explicitly. But he certainly does have a right to his beliefs. And in light of the press and other media, it is important to remember that fundamentalists are not the only ones who have an honest belief in censorship or who feel they have a grasp on Truth.

Educators and others can be found on all points of political, social, and intellectual spectra. No matter what group we belong to, I imagine that one time or another each of us feels as having a monopoly on certain truths and, in effect, knows a way--if not the way--to get through the "eye of the needle." Whether or not we believe we should have *the* say rather than *a* say--whether or not we believe we have the right to impose our way on others--are vital questions. At any rate, even though we had a lively discussion, I should have been more prepared to engage the students in a more complete deliberation for the sake of intellectual freedom.

Why do I refer to the episode as a failure? If I had been prepared for an open arena of ideas, we could have focused on the constraints of censorship.

We could have considered whether censoring evolution is the same as censoring sex and violence. We could have attended to indoctrination versus censorship. We could have discussed the locus of censorship (sometimes from within the group; sometimes from outside). We could have deliberated on selection versus censorship and if teachers and librarians focus on one or the other and why.

If I had been better prepared, "the prismatic hues of truth," as Robert Browning has written, might have emerged more clearly. Someone might have observed that some professors make available pamphlets on the role of religion in schools and the value of resonable-sounding words like balance, fairness, and equal time. While some students and professors favoring censorship do so honestly, others use it as a wedge to divide and sow strife and dissension within public schools for the purpose of destroying them. These are touchy topics, but unless we address them openly and honestly and even-handedly, civic-illiteracy and ethical-illiteracy and cowardice will have eroding effects on reading-and-writing literacy throughout the world.

An extraordinary book, incidentally, dealing with censorship is James Moffett's *Storm in the Mountains* (from Southern Illinois University Press). It deals with the book-burning in Kanawha County, West Virginia.

There are more topics and issues that could be mentioned--standards or expectations, home schooling, vouchers, tenure, inclusion, dyslexia, learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder--and the last three leads me into my next section: what we can do in the future.

The Future

Truth in Labeling

## Words That Have No Meaning***

Allen Berger

One of the many dangers to democracy, as George Orwell pointed out in his fiction and non-fiction, is the corruption of language. English and language arts teachers are on the front lines fighting for literacy and, through literacy, democracy. But if we're going to clean up language and strive toward literacy, we need to begin at home. For in schools and cities throughout our land we use phrases that are meaningless. One that is rampant is *prior knowledge.* What exactly is the difference between prior knowledge and knowledge? What is the knowledge supposed to be prior to? A student either knows something or he doesn't. And in a class of 25 or 30 students, tapping into their knowledge--or prior knowledge, whatever that is--is not an easy thing to do, for every student knows different bits and pieces--some more, some less, some correct, some erroneous--about any topic. Can you imagine the convolutions required in our thinking if the topic happened to be prior knowledge? We would have to tap into our prior knowledge about our prior knowledge.

Another bit of jargon we love to use--(and we really don't *love* to use it because if we did we would treat it with respect: we just use it and abuse it)--is *dyslexia.* Now I'm not saying that there is no such thing as dyslexia, a word that once referred to perceptual and neurological disorders affecting language: peculiar learning problems do exist. However, the truth is that nearly every child with a reading or writing problem is an education casualty: he or she has been messed up by the school or home. Some children may miss a lot of

school in the first grade and never learn what they should have learned there--like the sounds of letter combinations. Or some children get distracted if their parents split up and, for a time, cannot attend to their lessons. These children can be helped by knowledgeable teachers inside the regular classroom. They don't need to be pulled out and sent down the hall to a so-called special classroom. Every classroom is special.

In a lead article, titled "Dyslexia," in *Scientific American* (March 1987), Frank Vellutino clearly shows that students said to have dyslexia can be helped academically. The same is true of *learning disabilities*. Once upon a time when a child had a reading problem he was referred to as having a reading problem. Now he's referred to as having a learning disability. Anne McGill-Franzen, writing in the International Reading Association's *Reading Research Quarterly* (Fall 1987), shows that many students once called reading disabled are now called learning disabled. She points out that in one decade alone the number of students classified as learning disabled increased by 119 per cent--even though the academic problems and legal descriptions suggest that, for the most part, these are the same students. The only difference is the language used to describe them.

A consequence of this loose use of language to us and our democracy is that failure to read and write is now perceived as a physical disability rather than an academic or socioeconomic disadvantage. By using the jargon in vogue we shift the source for academic problems away from the schools, away from the homes, even away from the free will of children, to some kind of mysterious flaw in their brains. What this shift in language means is that everyone gets off the hook: it is not the child's fault that he can't read or forgot his homework: he's dyslexic or learning disabled. It's not the school's fault that she can't write well, it's not the parents' fault, it's not the home's

fault--it's nobody's fault because there is something the matter with the child's brain.

Suddenly, there are millions of students who have something the matter with their brains. Remarkably, a few years ago, when the definition of learning disabilities moved from one standard deviation to two standard deviations away from the mean average of a given test, thousands of learning disabled children were "cured" overnight--with the stroke of a pen.

Not so long ago CBS News announced that 25 million people cannot read because they have learning disabilities, and millions more citizens cannot read because they have dyslexia. The media also tell us that 90 per cent of the more than million men and women in prisons are illiterate. At the same time we are also informed that millions more throughout our land do not read or write English because they do not know it. In a poignant television film a college student is told that he reads at the fourth-grade level and there are 21 million others like him. Jonathan Kozol has said that 60 million adults are functionally illiterate in the United States.

If my arithmetic is correct, and there are not too many cross-overs, it seems that there are only three people left in the United States who can read and write English.

In no way do I wish to minimize the problem. Vast numbers of people cannot read or write well enough to cope in our increasingly technological world. Even if only one person were illiterate, that would be a shame.

But what are the practical consequences of tossing around figures and words so carelessly? What do we accomplish when we label kids *at-risk*? (We are all at risk.) These are the same kids, incidentally, that we used to call *disadvantaged*. They may or may not be disadvantaged or deprived or, as we also used to call them a long time ago, poor, but their vocabulary is growing

(as Julius Feiffer observed in another context a couple decades ago in a cartoon sequence in *The Village Voice.*).

What do we accomplish when so-called new problems are discovered in school children like *hypoglycemia* and *attention deficit disorder*? Chapters for ADD have formed all over the United States to fight this fast-spreading epidemic (and I use the word epidemic because ADD is referred to often as a disease) which, some claim, affects no less than 20 per cent of the population of North America. And now there are offshoots of ADD like AD/HD, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, with people writing articles and books on these topics, creating a growth industry, built on tissues, misleading the public. And the American Psychiatric Association is proposing more labels--AD/HD, predominantly inattention type; AD/HD, predominantly hyperactive-impulsive type; and AD/HD, combined type--for its new *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual--IV.* (This is the same manual that states that poor use of spelling, grammar, and punctuation may be a sign of a mental disorder called Disorder of Written Expression.) In large part what we accomplish is the creation of programs "costing taxpayers billions each year," as noted on the cover of *U.S. News & World Report* (December 13, 1993).

The greatest damage of all this nonsense, of course, is to our schoolchildren. By being labeled and mislabeled, they become boxed in and a certain amount of their free will is taken away. There is a tendency to focus on their weaknesses and errors rather than their strengths and successes.

(What a horror it was to me to wait for a red light and see for the first of many times a school bus passing by letting everyone know by block letters painted on the outside walls that inside were children labeled--or mislabeled--Developmentally Disabled/Mentally Handicapped. How would you enjoy riding such a bus to school or work?)

Teachers who know their stuff--and that's the great majority--have an abundance of appealing paperbacks and other wonderful literature in their classrooms for students to pick up and read before, during, and after school. And if a student happens to need help, the youngster isn't called names: he or she is helped by teachers or other students in the school or community.

Some of our best teaching takes place in the sports arena, and it's a rare teaching coach who says that one of his or her players dropped a football or didn't throw a pass well because he or she is learning disabled. *Our persistent misuse of language affects our communication, reveals us to each other like image-distorting mirrors, and moves us closer to becoming a remedial nation.*

The writing of *Engfish,* as English educator Ken Macrorie calls it, is not confined to literacy education. In *Nature: International Weekly Journal of Science* (November 5, 1992), Martin Gregory observes: "There are two kinds of scientific writing: that which is intended to be read, and that which is intended merely to be cited. The latter tends to be infected by an overblown and pompous style. The disease is ubiquitous, but often undiagnosed, with the result that infection spreads to writing of the first type."

The rest of the world is not immune to words that make little sense. Many top-notch executives use phrases in their spoken and written discourse such as *financial parameters* and *in the near future.* When asked to explain what these phrases mean, these same executives can't agree. In some fields outside education good writing is not what educators consider good writing. Intentionally writing ambigiously rather than clearly is the standard for many legal documents. Ambiguity, a key element in poetry, is often a crucial ingredient in the prose of business.

(Sometimes language in the business-world is not ambiguous at all. While eating breakfast my children and I discussed the Kid-Tested, Mother-Approved statement on the Kix cereal box. Encouraged by the offer on the cereal box--and by my children--to use the 800 number, I dialed General Mills. I said we do like their product but I was having guilt feelings and asked if the fathers found out something the mothers hadn't and so were unable to give their approval.)

Many abuses of language are documented in issues of the *Quarterly Review of Doublespeak* published by the National Council of Teachers of English. In Columbus, Ohio, a McDonald's employee wasn't fired; "his bosses simply stopped scheduling him for work." In Canada, "the Eaton chain of retail stores has initiated a 'corporate reorganization' that will rid itself of 'unneeded support functions'. . . ." In government, then "Secretary of Defense Les Aspin announced 'the end of the Star Wars era.' [However,] . . . that doesn't mean the Star Wars program is dead; it just means the name has been changed from the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) to the Ballistic Missile Defense Organization (BMDO). Even the budget will remain the same. . . ."

As George Orwell has observed in "Politics and the English Language," if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought." Political language, he continues, . . . "is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable." What we need to do is to teach our students to think simply and clearly. In classrooms throughout our nation we need to teach reading and writing literacy within the framework of other literacies--civic literacy, computer literacy, economic literacy, ethical literacy, scientific literacy, to name only a few. As the great U.S. Supreme Court Justice

Brandeis once observed, "Thinking, like the inanimate, takes the path of least resistance. To think hard and persistently is painful."

That is why it surprised me to read in one of the major national reports on the high school the statement, with no explanation, that "clear writing leads to clear thinking." I wrote to Ernest Boyer, author of that particular report, for the research to back up that statement. He wrote back and said that it's not based on research; it's based on his observations. Well, it's my observation that it's the other way around: clear thinking leads to clear writing and that writing, if anything, tests thinking, reveals thinking, exposes thinking (as in exposition). You'll recall Chaim Potok's best-selling novel, *The Chosen* (Ballantine/Fawcett Crest, 1967) wherein a father is raising his son in silence; the only time they talk to each other is when they are studying together. The youngster has a close friend whose father one day speaks to him and says: "In your father's writings I looked at his soul, not his mind." (p. 267) It takes a great deal of courage to expose one's soul.

In short, we must not hide behind words; we need to treat them with respect. We can challenge students to learn and help them understand that learning can be a challenge--and that's part of the fun of learning. We can have students--particularly inner-city students--shadow college undergraduates for a day. We can create programs like Teens for Literacy, in which inner-city teams of teens figure out ways to implementing ideas to improve literacy in their schools and neighborhoods.****

The upshot is that there are many ways to improve literacies in inner- and outer-city schools. Keeping language simple, challenging students, involving them in their education, including parents, customizing teaching to our cultural mosaic, using common and uncommon sense, clarifying the

role of principals are seven ways to improve literacies that cost little and add much to the value of education.

In addition:

Sharing ideas in a clear way with the public
Being honest
Policing our own profession
Standing up for what's right
Inviting students to select their textbooks
Evaluating the performance of administrators
Fighting for the freedom to read
Keeping abreast through professional publications and conferences.

And we can empower students through learning opportunities such as Teens for Literacy, through I-Search projects (see Ken Macrorie), through problem-finding as well as -solving, through helping students to know their past to build a future, and through the power of their language. Children own little, legally or otherwise, but they do own their language.

In the 19th century Henri Stendhal wrote one of the world's great novels, *The Red and the Black*. The story takes place in a time when there were only two ways to escape from poverty: through the red, the uniform of the military, or through the black, the uniform of the clergy. In this century and the next the way out of poverty (whether of circumstances or ideas) is through education. With leadership, will power and good will, we can influence the conditions under which all children no matter where they live can learn best.

In my home I have a saying in artistic form from the great Maimonides the Rambam: Awake Ye Sleepers From Your Slumber: Tomorrow Begins Today. If we do not speak up in behalf of what we know to be right today, those who look back on us in coming years will not look back on us kindly.

*References* (all by Allen Berger)


* Influenced by Fantasy Posing as Fact, *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Feb. 8, 1995.

** Censorship Among Our Students, *Reading Today*, February/March, 1995.

*** Adapted from Words That Have No Meaning, *Reading Today*, October/November, 1995.

**** Teens for Literacy in Inner-City Schools, *Ohio Reading Teacher*, Fall 1993.


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